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ABSTRACT

The multifactor method of elementary school closing, a method that designates the most appropriate school to close as the one having the highest average weight on a series of factors, is an attempt to bring objectivity to a decision-making process usually characterized by subjectivity and vagueness. It attempts to apply accepted planning and evaluation procedures to elementary school closing. Such an approach assumes that identifying the most appropriate elementary school to close is a complex task that cannot suitably be determined by any one single factor. The method depends on a clear identification of the specific reason that school closure is being considered (such as saving the most money while moving the fewest students and eliminating the poorest physical facilities). When selecting the number of factors to include, the administrator must consider their relevance to the reason for closure and the ease of application (that is, ease of data collection and analysis). Although it might seem simplest to give all factors equal weight, it is soon readily apparent that some factors are more important than others. A companion paper describes the practical aspects of the method in more detail. (Author/JM)

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# Rationale For The Multifactor Method Of Elementary School Closing

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Practical aspects of a method to close elementary school buildings are detailed in Puleo (1981 b). Technical considerations are similarly addressed elsewhere (Puleo c). The present paper focuses on the conceptual basis of the method. In so doing it examines a number of concerns that would appear to have generalized relevance to school administrators who are confronted, probably for the first time, with this rather awesome task.

## Purpose

The multifactor method is presented as a preliminary attempt to apply accepted planning and evaluation procedures to an elementary school closing. It seeks to bring the elements of objectivity, explicitness, and concern for reasonable technical standards within a coherent conceptual framework. In this sense, it is an attempt to bring a methodology, a sense of comprehensiveness, to an educational problem that too often in the past has been approached by degrees of subjectivity, incompleteness, and vagueness. The method is not presented as synonymous with a selection to close in that it is recognized that a school closing has profound ramifications on many levels - including political. The approach is rather an attempt to bring to the decision-making process an objective body of data characterized by a degree of validity and reliability.

Within the limitations of the approach, the most appropriate elementary school to close is defined as one having the highest average weight or rank on a series of factors.

## Multifactor Design

Central to the method is an emphasis on a series of determining factors. Such an approach accepts that identifying the most appropriate elementary school to close is a complex task which cannot be suitably described by any one single factor. It creates a framework for comparison and analysis which sharpens evaluative outcomes. In so doing, it provides the administrator with a methodological tool, while offering the consumer, e.g., parent, a degree of reassurance that this emotionally laden situation is being studied with objectivity and thoroughness.

## Establishing Reason For Closing

Specific reasons for closing an elementary school building will vary somewhat from one district to another. To the extent warranted, a needs-assessment should be conducted. In many cases however, it would appear that reasons boil down to two - program, and cost. Consolidation of physical facilities may be viewed as necessary for purposes of program efficiency. School closing in this instance may allow for greater administrative coordination of facilities which are at the moment a considerable distance apart. Considering current public school budget constraints nevertheless the most pressing reason for school closing is cost savings.

It is most important to clearly identify the principal reason inasmuch as the particular series of factors included for consideration will vary accordingly. The reason might be: "to save the greatest amount of money", or it might be "to save the greatest amount of money while moving or displacing the fewest students possible". It may be still more complex: "saving the greatest amount of money while moving the fewest students possible and closing the school with poor physical facilities".

To the extent that the purpose is not articulated, the method risks vulnerability in all subsequent phases.

## Identifying Factors

Once the reason has been established, the task is to identify those factors which translate the general statement into operational form. These factors should be agreed on prior to collecting data. As one illustration, if cost savings is the overiding reason, possible factors might be:

cost of building operation;

salaries saved by closing;

added transportation cost.

If, on the other hand, school closing is closely tied in with a long-range plan of capital facilities, additional factors such as the following should be considered:

building age;

adequacy of physical program facilities;

efficiency of building operation.

Or, as indicated above, savings may be emphasized but only in comparison to the number of students moved. If so, this enters the series of factors.

As an additional consideration, it may be argued that the school chosen should be one demonstrating a high rate of enrollment decline. Two particular factors demonstrating this trend are:

enrollment;

percent of enrollment decline over a fixed period of time.

The total number of factors identified for all purposes cited in the

current illustration is nine. It would seem that these provide reasonable coverage for a wide range of reasons for closing a school. Additional ones might be added if greater comprehensiveness is desired, or a somewhat specialized or unique purpose is established. An additional potentially important factor, for instance, may be some index of community or neighborhood reaction to the closing. Program impact or disruption, and building saleability or rentability are other possibilities. A major limitation to increasing the number of factors at the present time is that certain of them are based on rating scales which have not been adequately researched. Practically speaking, experience has suggested that the method becomes cumbersome after approximately ten factors. There is also the distinct possibility that the degree of contribution of each factor is reduced after some point inasmuch as overlap becomes clearly evident. Study is in progress which attempts to clarify this issue. For the administrator at the moment however, the overiding concerns in deciding upon how many factors are included are relevance to purpose, and ease of application. That is, do the factors provide critical data bearing on the stated reason? And, is the effort of data collection and analysis proportional to the value of the outcomes?

## Weighting Of Factors

A decision should be made regarding the relative value or weight of each factor. It might be concluded that all factors will bear equal weight. The disadvantages of this alternative seem to outweight the advantages. Particularly in situations where the number of factors is relatively large, it tends to be readily apparent that some are more important than others.

Indeed, the complexity of the pattern of weights may be taken as a direct reflection of the distinctiveness of the local reason for closing. Overlap would also suggest that weighting is preferred. However, because weighting is judgmental, the resulting distribution of weights may be open to question.

## Summary

A rationale of a method of elementary school closing is described. The rationale includes the value of a multifactor design, the importance of clearly establishing the reason for closing, and a review of the basis for selecting factors and then weighting them.

## References

Puleo, V. Practical aspects of the multifactor method of elementary school closing. Local paper, 1981 b.

Puleo, V. Technical aspects of the multifactor method of elementary school closing. Local paper, 1981 c.